



Reclaiming Women in the Hebrew Bible

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As a child one of my favourite past times while visiting my grandparents' home was to peruse their bookshelves. I was an avid reader, and my grandparents had a fine collection of books, particularly Jewish books. I was keenly interested in my Judaism, even as a young child, and so found the collections of Jewish history, theology, Israeli picture books, and much else an excellent source to pass the time during my holidays. And as a girl, particularly one who even at a relatively young age who was looking for my place in the Jewish community, I remember looking for a reflection of myself in those books – where were Jewish women? Who could be my role models?

Perhaps that is why the volume, *Great Jewish Women*, was so interesting to me [slide 2]. A book all about Jewish women, where the first third of the book is devoted to the 'Early Years', which largely corresponds to the Hebrew Bible, designed to demonstrate how each of the women discussed could serve as role models – what more could I ask for? Published in 1940 this book was all about explaining how the women of the Hebrew Bible, Talmud, and later history were just like 1940s Jewish women – and sketches of some of the women were included alongside the short description of their stories. Skipped over were any women too worrisome or too unsavoury, and even the ones that were included were sanitised in some fashion. Most of the women have some sort of appellation appended to their names, such as 'Sarah, The Mother of Her People' or 'Esther, A Star of Good Fortune'. Only in the highly problematic story of Jephthah's daughter, which I will mention later, did the author leave off an appellation. But all of these women are ultimately portrayed as good wives, mothers, and daughters who sometimes fought oppression, but only of a certain limited model. No one wanted a new generation of Jewish women to get the wrong sort of idea about who they could become.

I have always held an attachment to this musty, dried out volume. I ascribe to it a kind of turning point in my own personal narrative. I loved this book because it belonged to my grandparents, but I also knew, somehow, that it was hiding the real stories of these women, stories that have become central both to my academic life and my personal ethno-religious journey. In order for me to find role models within my own tradition, I needed to reclaim many of these stories and just at the point at which I was old enough to do so, I discovered that I was very much not alone in my journey.

Before I jump into taking us all on a journey around the women of the Hebrew Bible, a few words about terminology are required. You will note that I consistently use the term 'Hebrew Bible'. A Hebrew Bible is decidedly not the same as an Old Testament, and not merely because the order of the books contained within each is different. Names are always important; as we shall see, as they are resonating with meaning. An Old Testament is predicated on the existence of a New Testament, which supersedes the Old Testament, a concept which Jews entirely reject. Although Jews more generally refer to their holy scripture by its Hebrew name, Tanakh, I will use the more commonly employed academic terminology of Hebrew Bible during the course of this lecture. For the purposes of clarity, a Hebrew Bible consists of three sections – Torah, Prophets, and Writings, each of which is subdivided into other books [slide 3]. All of the women I will discuss today appear in one of these books. Additionally, all translations in this lecture are from the 1985 Jewish Publication Society [JPS] translation of the Hebrew Bible, unless otherwise noted.

How then to begin? A list of female figures in the Hebrew Bible would be not only dull for you to listen to, but also unfeasibly long as a starting point. Although most people can name some women in the Hebrew Bible, few realise just how many women there are within the text. Many are named, but many are not. Some are Israelite, some are pre-Israelite, some are non-Israelite, and some transcend such easy boundaries or

categorisations. Some are wives, mothers, and daughters and their stories are wrapped in these identities. Others are sex workers, queens, prophets, judges, foreign agents, and much more. Many of them, just like real women, are more than one of these things. Questions abound of agency and consent, voice and silence, subjectivity and objectivity – too many to address all of them today. I will try to allude to all of these issues without any easy conclusions. Alongside my lecture, you will also see selected images of some of the women I am discussing. Many of these images are by contemporary female artists, though not all of them. Details of titles, artists, and dates are on screen. These images are deliberately meant to be thought provoking, displaying the ongoing power of these biblical stories. I will not have time to discuss each of these images, but hope that as I speak, you will be able to use these images in conjunction with my lecture to explore your own responses to and views of these women.

I want to begin, however, with the first mention of the female gender in the Hebrew Bible. Many people assume this means Eve, but it does not. I shall return to her in moment. In fact the first mention of the female gender in relation to human beings appears in Genesis 1: 27 [slide 4]:

‘And God created humankind in the divine image,/creating it in the image of God –/creating them male and female.’¹

Starting here is important, as is using the gender-sensitive adaption of the JPS translation. Biblical Hebrew is a heavily gendered language making getting to the meaning of this verse complicated. Moreover, the exact meaning of the phrase ‘the image of God’ demands a lecture in and of itself. But for our purposes, I want to point out that in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Hebrew Bible at the crucial moment of the creation of human beings, gender is already clearly indicated as a reflection of the divine – *and it is both genders that are accorded this divinity*.

I am, of course, hardly the first person to point this out, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton writing in 1895 states, ‘If language has any meaning, we have in these texts a plain declaration of the existence of the feminine element in the Godhead, equal in power and glory with the masculine.’² Precisely the reason I want to bring this account of creation to our attention. The first women created are created jointly with the first men and together, in addition to making up the first humans, they are both created in the image of God, neither privileged over the other, both with equal vitality and sanctity. If we take this first creation story as the beginning of the narrative of human beings in the Hebrew Bible, then we can begin to reclaim women as equally important to their male counterparts in the stories the text is about to tell us.

So if the first creation story tells us that men and women are both created equally in the divine image, the second creation story (yes, the Hebrew Bible has two creation narratives) tells us a very different narrative. Here a single human is created first, not a mass of humanity. This first human being is known in Hebrew as *Adam*, meaning a human being, which only later in the story becomes the proper name, Adam. This Hebrew word is the same one used in the first creation story to refer to both men and women and appears to be a generic term for human beings.³ Presumably this confusion between the term’s generic meaning and use as a proper name is what enables the Midrash, an ancient rabbinic collections of exegesis of the biblical text, to suggest that this first human created in the second creation story was actually a hermaphrodite [slide 5].⁴ The early rabbis imagine that this creature was half-male and half-female and that when it was put into a deep sleep,⁵ rather than a rib being removed, the creature was simply divided in half, a reading borne out by the translation of the Hebrew word, *mitzalo’tav*, which can mean ‘from the side’. In this interpretation, again, the first human being is neither male nor female, but both, and thus the woman is not subservient to the man, but rather part of the original dual gendered human.

Of course, the second creation story goes on to create a very different narrative around the female human being. During the story of both the man and the woman eating from the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden – and I must stress that Judaism has no theology of original sin – and after God doles out their punishments, only at that point is the woman named as Chava, or Eve as she is better known in English, a play on the Hebrew meaning of her name [slide 6]. The Hebrew root of Chava is the same as the word for

¹ *The Contemporary Torah: A Gender-Sensitive Adaptation of the JPS Translation*, pg. 2.

² Stanton, *The Women’s Bible*, 14-5.

³ David J. Clines, “אָדָם, The Hebrew for ‘Human, Humanity:’ A Response to James Barr,” *Vetus Testamentum* LIII, 3 (2003): 297-310; cf. Robert Alter, *Genesis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 5; Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 15.

⁴ Genesis Rabbah 8:1, technically they label this creature an androgynous.

⁵ Genesis 2: 21.

life; hence, she is named Chava because 'she was the mother of all the living'.⁶ In the story in the Hebrew Bible, both the man and the woman, Adam and Chava, are punished alongside the snake for transgressing God's injunction against eating from the fruit of the Tree, though they are punished individually with different punishments. The snake is punished for encouraging the man and woman into transgressing and the man is punished both for listening to the woman and for eating from the Tree. Curiously, the text does not list a reason why the woman is punished; we are simply meant to infer it.

But while all of them are punished, much has been made of the woman's punishment – pain in childbirth followed by the final section, 'Yet your urge shall be for your husband, / And he shall rule over you.'⁷ For millennia this final part of the punishment has been used as justification for the subjugation of women. Within the context of the hetero-patriarchal framework of the Hebrew Bible, this verse stands as the backdrop to every other female character that we will encounter, making encountering Chava foundational to our journey.

To give us an idea of what biblical women we may be less familiar with, the next women mentioned chronologically by the biblical text include Cain's wife, who is unnamed; Adah and Zilpah, the named wives of Lamech; and Naamah, the sister of Tubal-cain; all of whom are mentioned within the span of five verses towards the end of Genesis 4.⁸ About Cain's wife and Naamah, we know nothing at all. But Lamech speaks to his wives, granting us some little insight into Lamech, but nothing at all about Adah and Zilpah.

Rather than go through each named and unnamed woman as they appear in the Hebrew Bible, a task that would surely take longer than I have left, I propose instead to use the contents of a little-known midrash from the 2nd century CE to help structure the rest of this lecture. In this very early rabbinic commentary, it is stated that there are seven prophetesses in the Hebrew Bible.⁹ They are in order of the midrash: Sarah, Miriam, Hannah, Deborah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther. Some of these women may be more familiar to us than others; some may be more of a surprise on this list than others. The list spans all of the three major sections of a Hebrew Bible and all of the major historical periods of Israelite history, making it a good jumping off point for us. I shall take each of them in turn, discussing not only each of these women, but also some of the other women who exist at similar times and in the same books or sections of the Hebrew Bible.

Sarah, or Sarai as she first named by the text before her name is changed by God, is best known as the wife of the first of the biblical patriarchs, Abraham [slide 7]. In turn she is the first among the matriarchs, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, who are often referenced thus in Jewish liturgy and who are themselves the wives of the other patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob. Although all four women are defined by their roles as wives and mothers, they nevertheless have strong characters and voices that come through their stories.

According to the rabbis, Sarah is ascribed the status of prophetess precisely for what she says. The proof text is Genesis 21: 12 where God tells Abraham: '...whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says...' The context here is part of a larger story arc to do with Hagar, the Egyptian woman who is Sarah's servant. Initially, during the many years when Sarah and Abraham were unable to conceive, Sarah told Abraham to use Hagar for her fertility, to take her as a second wife, and to conceive a child with her. In Genesis 16 Abraham responds by listening to Sarah's voice, i.e. doing as he is told. Hagar bears him Ishmael and in turn Sarah is lowered in Hagar's esteem. The text is unclear – is Hagar's estimation of Sarah based only Sarah's bareness versus her own fertility or might Hagar also resent being passed to Sarah's husband to be used for her fertility without any thought to her own rights? Sarah realises quickly the animosity between them and treats Hagar more harshly until she runs away. Only the words of God's messenger forces her back. Later, Genesis 21, when Sarah finally has her own son – the one about whom she laughs when she hears that she will conceive in her old age – Sarah grows jealous of Hagar and her first-born son, Ishmael, again. This time she wants Abraham to throw both out of their home, apparently without any concern for what may happen to them. Hagar and Ishmael are now nothing more than competition for her own progeny, Isaac, and thus for the inheritance rights. Abraham is alarmed by her voice this time around. And as with Hagar earlier, God is the one to quell Abraham's concerns, insisting that Abraham do as Sarah tells him.

Jealousy, competition for fertility and inheritance, dysfunctional polygamous families, and abusive power dynamics – sadly these themes are repeated down the generations. While Rebecca is Isaac's only wife, her sons quarrel endlessly and both she and Isaac play favourites with their twin boys. Ultimately, Rebecca's chosen son, Jacob, who is 2nd not 1st born, will gain the birth right with the help of his mother. Conversely,

⁶ Genesis 3: 20.

⁷ Genesis 3: 16.

⁸ Genesis 4: 17 – 22.

⁹ Seder Olam Rabbah 21

Leah and Rachel are the sister wives of Jacob. Leah is the elder of the two, whom Jacob is tricked into marrying, and though highly fertile, she is not loved by Jacob [slide 8]. Rachel is his beloved, but she has trouble conceiving. The women squabble over conjugal rights and resort to giving Jacob their servants, Bilhah and Zilpah, as secondary wives for their fertility in bearing yet more sons for him. The animosity between the Leah and Rachel is only ended by Rachel's death in childbirth, simply passing on the favouritism and dysfunction into a new generation.

Like Sarah before them, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah all speak. In particular, Rebecca is the only biblical woman to speak directly with God. When the twins struggled in her womb, she demands of God directly to know what is going on and God replies to her directly, explaining to her that she was not carrying two babies but two nations and that in time the older would serve the younger.¹⁰ Meanwhile Leah speaks often for a much more common purpose in the Hebrew Bible for women – to name her children. Indeed, overall women are cited as naming their children more often than men.¹¹ As for Rachel, the first time the text relays her direct speech is Genesis 30: 1, when she demands of Jacob, 'Give me children or I shall die.' Again the twin themes of barrenness and fertility become the driving force of her narrative and voice. Bilhah and Zilpah, conversely, never speak; they simply soundlessly conceive and bear children over and over.

Throughout this early, foundational period in Genesis, the biblical text presents women whose stories revolve primarily around marriage, conception, childbirth, and motherhood. Their relationships with the men in their lives are largely constrained to these areas, irrespective of whether their marriages are described as loving or not. Additionally these stories already begin to raise issues of power and consent and how women were pitted against each other in the fertility competition.

The next woman on our list of prophetesses is Miriam, well-known as the sister of Moses and Aaron, she is also named by the biblical text as a prophetess in Exodus 15: 20, where following the safe crossing of the Sea of Reeds, Miriam leads the women in dancing, a timbrel in her hands. Miriam, alongside an impressive array of women, all play central roles in the story of the exodus from Egypt [slide 9]. Shifrah and Puah early on are the midwives who refused Pharaoh's command to kill upon birth the male children of the Hebrew slaves they delivered. Not only do these courageous women defy Pharaoh, but they also lie to him under questioning about the matter.

Moses's mother, who is only named much later in Numbers 26: 59 as Jochebed, is also courageous as she braves the decision to set her baby son adrift in a wicker basket along the Nile river in order to save him from Pharaoh's newest order to drown all male, Hebrew infants in that same river. And it is Moses' sister, unnamed at this point in the story, who watches over him until his discovery downstream by Pharaoh's daughter. She pulls him from the river and adopts him as her own. In a perhaps not so unpredictable twist, Moses's own birth mother is then entrusted as his wet nurse.

And once Moses is grown, having murdered an Egyptian slave master who was beating a Hebrew slave, Moses flees to Midian. There he meets the seven daughters of the priest of Midian eventually marrying one of them, Zipporah [slide 10]. She bears him a son and much later on will save his life in a section of the text often referred to as the bridegroom of blood passage.¹² Here she takes a flint and circumcises her son on the road back to Egypt.

All of these women – Shifra, Puah, Zipporah, Moses's mother and sister (Jochebed and Miriam), Pharaoh's daughter – all appear within the first two chapters of the book of Exodus. And all of them in one way or another serve as protectors. So while we might often think of this section of the story as being Moses's origin story, he is outnumbered 6 to 1 by the women around him and the courage each of them display in ensuring he will thrive. These women represent almost the full gamut of the types of female characters we find in the Hebrew Bible. We have named women and unnamed women, foreign women and Hebrew women, royal women and slave women, girls and adult women, wives and mothers and daughters, women with leadership roles and without. What all of them share in common is that they are nurturers, women who care.

Miriam herself goes on to have a more prominent role in the story as it develops. She becomes the locus of much attention by later Jewish interpreters as well [slide 11]. In the biblical text in addition to her role leading the women in song and dance after crossing the Sea of Reeds, the book of Numbers also recounts an

¹⁰ Genesis 25: 22 – 23.

¹¹ 27 times for mothers compared to 17 times for fathers. Ebeling, Jennie R., *Women's Lives in Biblical Times*. (London: T & T Clark, 2010), 103, citing Meyers.

¹² Exodus 4: 24 – 26.

incident where Miriam and her brother Aaron speak out against Moses regarding a Cushite woman whom he married.¹³ While commentators disagree on the exact nature of their rebuke, what is perhaps most extraordinary is that both Miriam and Aaron speak out to question Moses's leadership with the question 'Has the Eternal One spoken only through Moses?' Miriam challenges Moses's leadership here not from the position of wife or mother, for the biblical text never describes her as having married or borne children, but as a leader of equal standing to Moses. God does intervene, making clear that Moses is the God's chosen leader and punishes Miriam. Miriam is stricken down with a skin ailment that causes her to be shut out of the Israelite camp for seven days. But the whole of the Israelite camp does not move for this entire period. Only when Miriam is readmitted do they begin to march again.

Moreover, when Miriam dies in Numbers 20: 1, she is buried properly. In the very next verse the text tells us that 'the community was without water'. According to the Talmud, the foundational text of Jewish law dating from approximately the 4th century,

*Three good leaders had arisen for Israel, namely, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and for their sake three good things were conferred [upon Israel], namely, the Well, the Pillar of Cloud and the Manna; the Well, for the merit of Miriam....*¹⁴

Commentators link the lack of water following her death to the idea of the well. According to Rashi, the greatest of the medieval Jewish commentators, this well followed the people for the whole of their journey through the desert until Miriam died. It was her merit that allowed it to travel with them. Other commentators link the well directly to her standing watch over her infant brother Moses in his basket on the Nile. This version of Miriam continues the theme of women as nurturers, but not in the traditional roles of mother and wives. Instead Miriam becomes the protector and provider for the whole of the house of Israel, a senior leader, whose leadership provides the people with life sustaining water throughout her lifetime.

The next generation of biblical women is more complex. According to our list, Deborah is the prophetess during the period of the conquest and settling of the ancient land of Israel [slide 12]. Deborah, whose story appears in Judges 4 and whose famous song appears in chapter 5, is named as a prophetess: 'And Deborah, the wife of Lappidoth, was a prophetess; she led Israel at that time.'¹⁵

But already the phrase 'wife of Lappidoth' is problematic. Other than this reference, Lappidoth is not mentioned anywhere else in the story. According to the Talmud, this phrase doesn't mean 'wife of Lappidoth' at all, but, as the Hebrew word for wife and woman are the same, rather the phrase should be translated as a woman who made wicks for the torches in the Sanctuary.¹⁶ Perhaps Deborah is not, after all, anyone's wife, but rather a prophetess with a minor, but important function at the Sanctuary, who led her people. The next verse tells us that in her role, she used to sit beneath a palm tree and Israelites would come to her and ask her to serve as an arbitrator, a judge, between people. Such a role would have been highly significant and suggests a woman of substantial standing and respect within the community.

Moreover when Sisera, an army commander for the local Canaanite king, comes to attack the Israelites, Deborah takes charge. She summons Barak, who appears to be a local military leader, and tells him what to do. Deborah sets out the strategy, but he is unwilling to follow her plan unless she goes with him. In that case, Deborah tells him, Sisera will not die by his hand but by that of a woman. Barak does not respond, and Deborah goes with him. Ultimately Sisera is killed by Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, when she pretends to offer him refuge from the battle and instead puts him to sleep with warm milk, driving a tent pin through his temple as he slept.

After the battle Deborah and Barak sing together the verse that comprises almost the whole of chapter 5. At the end the text tells us that 'the land was tranquil for forty years.'¹⁷ Deborah has judged wisely, led brilliantly, and aided by a non-Israelite woman ally, achieved military success through her strategy. The result is peace for a generation. Neither Deborah nor Jael are primarily mothers, wives, or daughters. Neither of them is portrayed primarily as carers or nurturers. Neither woman is obsessed with her fertility. And they work together, not at odds with each, to secure peace and stability for the community.

¹³ Numbers 12.

¹⁴ B. Ta'anit 9a [Soncino translation]

¹⁵ וְדִבְרָה אִשָּׁה נְבִיאָה אָשֶׁת לִפְדֹת הִיא שִׁפְטָה אֶת-יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּעֵת הַהִיא:

¹⁶ B. Megillah 14a; this tradition is repeated by Rashi in his commentary on this verse.

¹⁷ Judges 5: 31.

But not all women in this period are so lucky. The books of Joshua and Judges are complex and the roles of the women in them are equally so. The stories these books contain speak to a time first of conquest and then, as the Israelites attempt to settle the land, a time of decentralised governance, local politics, skirmishes, and lawlessness – a bit like the Wild West. During such a time, we should not be surprised to find that gender roles, like so many other social boundaries, are not rigidly enforced. Women can be leaders, like Deborah, and killers of enemy generals, like Jael, but they are also wives, mothers, prostitutes, spies, and victims of extreme, gender-based violence.

The major female figure from the book of Joshua, for example, is Rahab, a brothel keeper and perhaps a prostitute herself, who provides cover for Joshua's spies in Jericho. Despite instructions from the King of Jericho to tell him when the spies arrive, she does not. Instead Rahab tells the spies that she understands that the Israelites possess divine authority to conquer her city and, therefore, she intends to help them. In return she wants protection for herself and all of her household. The spies swear an oath with her, and Rahab not only protects them from the King of Jericho, but also misdirects the king's men away from the spies. Once Jericho falls to Joshua, Rahab and her family are protected and, we are told, that Rahab 'dwelt among the Israelites – as is still the case.'¹⁸ In fact, the rabbis imagined this afterlife, explaining that she converted, married Joshua himself, and among their descendants is Huldah the prophetess, whom we shall discuss shortly.¹⁹

But not all of the women in this period fared so well. Among the other prominent female figures in Judges, we find Delilah, the Philistine spy, who seduces Samson in order to discover the secret to his strength. Though Delilah is successful in drawing out the answer from him, ultimately the plan backfires when Samson, then captive, pulls down the Philistine temple, killing everyone inside, and defeating them.

More problematic, however, are the stories of honour-based killing, rape, rape-marriage, and torture, including the story of Jephthah's daughter, the Levite's secondary wife, and the women of Shiloh [slide 13]. These women are all women whose agency has largely been stripped of them, and they are subjected to the very worst of male violence. Jephthah's daughter, who he sacrifices as the result of an ill construed vow to God, can do nothing more than postpone the event by going to the hills for two months to weep over her virginity.²⁰ *Great Jewish Women* concludes her story by describing her as 'the girl who was willing to give up life itself for her father's honour'. Given that in our contemporary world honour-based killing remains a major issue for women's safety, this summary is deeply alarming.²¹

The story of the Levite's secondary wife is equally problematic. She runs away from her husband back to her father's house, but the Levite follows after her to recover her. On their way back to his house, they stop overnight in the town of Gibeah in the tribe of Benjamin. The house where they have been granted hospitality is surrounded by local townsmen, demanding the Levite be brought out so that they could 'be intimate with him.'²² Instead, the Levite shoves his secondary wife out the front door, where she is raped and brutally abused all night, eventually dying on the doorstep in the morning. The Levite uses this outrage, for which he claims no responsibility, as a pretext to begin an intertribal war against the Benjaminites, which results in the deaths of all but six hundred Benjaminite men.²³ With no women of their own tribe left to marry and with the other tribes having sworn not to marry their own daughters to the Benjaminites, the tribal leaders suddenly realise that the tribe of Benjamin will die out. So these same tribal leaders find a single town that did not participate in the war, slaughter everyone except for virginal women, and force these women to marry the remnant of the Benjaminites. When too few women are found here, they contrive to send the remaining Benjaminites off to Shiloh to await the virgin women who dance in the fields there annually. The Benjaminites then abduct these women and force them into rape-marriage.²⁴

Judges finishes with the statement that 'In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased.'²⁵ In such a period the possibilities and risks for women were more extreme. In a time when no

¹⁸ Joshua 6: 25.

¹⁹ B. Megillah 14b

²⁰ Judges 11.

²¹ *Great Jewish Women*, pg. 43.

²² Judges 19: 22.

²³ Judges 21.

²⁴ Judges 22. For a more extensive analysis of the term 'rape-marriage' see, Gafney, Wil, "Mother Knows Best: Messianic Surrogacy and Sexploitation in Ruth," in *Mother Good, Mother Jones, Mommie Dearest: Biblical Mothers and Their Children*, Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan and Tina Pippin eds, (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 23 – 36.

²⁵ Judges 22: 25.

centralised leadership or governance existed to be enforced, some women, like Deborah or Rahab, could traverse the normal boundaries and achieve great things for their communities and families, but equally many women were left completely unprotected from male violence, like the nameless women of Shiloh and the Levite's secondary wife.

The period of the early monarchy, by contrast, begins to provide clearly boundaries for women's protection and roles within the heteropatriarchal structures of the Hebrew Bible. The prophetess of this period is Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel [slide 14]. Hannah's story is another story of a wife and mother, another one who initially appears barren. Hannah is one of two wives of Elkanah. Her co-wife, Peninah who had many children, would taunt Hannah.²⁶ And while the text makes clear that Elkanah loved Hannah and remained devoted her, Hannah remained miserable.²⁷ On one annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah wept incessantly at the entrance to the temple there. She prayed for a child and vowed that if she had a son, he would be dedicated to God throughout his life. Eli the priest observed Hannah and admonished her assuming that she was drunk, not praying for a child as, indeed, she was. Hannah stood up for herself, explaining that she was praying, and Eli departed from her asking that God fulfil her prayers.²⁸ Hannah did then conceive and, after weaning her son, Samuel, brought him to Shiloh to serve Eli in his role as priest. The story ends with Hannah's prayer.²⁹

Hannah is the ultimate maternal figure, so desperate for a child that she is willing to give him up for service to God. But for the early rabbis, Hannah, particularly her prayer and the way she interacts with Eli, teach us numerous legal precepts.³⁰ Many of these legal precepts deal with the correct way to pray, establishing norms for prayer life that continue in Jewish communities to this day. Moreover, the rabbinic commentators of the Talmud make the extraordinary statement that,

From the day that the Holiness, be God blessed, created God's world, there was no person who called the Holiness, be God blessed, 'Eternal One of Hosts' [Adonai Tzevot] until Hannah came and called God 'Eternal One of Hosts'.³¹

In other words, they declare that Hannah is the first person to call God by this formative name, *Adonai Tzevot*. So while few women appear in the stories of the early development of the monarchical period, Hannah stands as foundational figure, not merely in her role as mother, but rather in her role as creating the archetype for Jewish prayer life.

One other woman of significance during this period is the so-called Witch of Endor. Following the death of Samuel, King Saul goes in search of strategic guidance in his forthcoming battle with the Philistines. But when Saul can find no other help and despite having outlawed all forms of magic and sorcery, he goes in search of a woman who is able to summon the dead, 'the woman of the *ob* in Endor'.³² The meaning of *ob* isn't completely clear and the translation of 'witch' is not particularly helpful either. She is most likely some sort of necromancer. In any case, she is powerful, but also hidden, fearful of the king's sanctions against her practices. Yet, this once powerful king seeks her out. She is able to communicate with Samuel for Saul, but the result is even more disastrous for Saul than if he had not sought her out. So while her power appears to remain undiminished by her encounter with the declining king, neither does the text endorse her practices.

Overall the women of this period have a degree of personal agency, while becoming increasingly circumscribed by the formation of a monarchy and the ensuing structures its establishment puts in place.

This trend can be seen even more clearly as the Davidic monarchy is established and the women in these stories move back to the more limited roles of wives, mothers, and daughters, albeit ones caught up within the context of royal intrigue and power struggles. The women of this period include the numerous wives of David, Solomon, and the numerous kings who follow on from them. The Hebrew Bible tells the stories of

²⁶ | Samuel 1: 6.

²⁷ | Samuel 1: 8.

²⁸ | Samuel 1: 9 – 19.

²⁹ | Samuel 2: 1 – 10.

³⁰ B. Berachot 31a-b.

³¹ B. Berachot 31b.

³² בְּעֵלְתֵי־אֹב בְּעֵין דּוֹר

David's wives Abigail,³³ Michal,³⁴ and Bathsheva³⁵ as well as his so-called 'bed warmer' Avishag³⁶ and his daughter, Tamar³⁷, followed by the stories of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba as well as Solomon's numerous foreign wives.³⁸ Later on we find the unnamed wife of Jeroboam;³⁹ Maacah, the mother or more likely grandmother of Asa;⁴⁰ Jezebel, who was co-ruler with Ahab;⁴¹ and Athaliah, who was originally the wife of Jehoram and who eventually became queen in her own right.⁴²

The prophetess of this period is Abigail, who begins her story married to the unpromisingly named Nabal, or 'fool' [slide 15]. When the as of yet uncrowned David is marauding through the countryside demanding tribute, Nabal declines to feed David or his men. In the middle of the night, however, Abigail descends to David's camp along with copious provisions for him. She counsels David against getting blood on his hands by killing Nabal or harming anyone in his or, more importantly, her household, instead ensuring that David's anger is subdued through her wise words and offers of food and sustenance. David is quelled by her and refrains from harming anyone in the household. When Nabal mysteriously dies soon thereafter of apparently natural causes, David sends for Abigail in order to take her as wife.

While Abigail is named as a prophetess for her words of wisdom, the rabbis of the Talmud cannot quite believe that Abigail's wisdom and presence of mind is what saved the day. Instead they concoct an elaborate interpretation of the text whereby Abigail reveals her thigh to David and so enthralled is he by its sight that he will, in effect, do anything for her.⁴³ Indeed, Rav Nahman, an early 3rd century CE rabbi, goes even further, quoting what appears to be a popular proverb: 'While a woman is in conversation, she spindles,' i.e., while a woman may appear to be engaged in one activity, she is already thinking about something else. In this case, while Abigail may have appeared only to be thinking about how to save her household from David's wrath, she was already thinking about marrying him.

While the rabbis may have looked for ways to undermine Abigail's conflict resolution skills in the face of David's aggression, she typifies the position of many of the women during this period – women with limited agency, albeit often within the context of an elevated social class, trying to negotiate their challenging circumstances. Even Tamar, David's daughter, within the highly constrained limitations of her desperate circumstances tries to do so. After her half-brother, Amnon, rapes her, she pleads with him to marry her, but Amnon, whose lust turns to repulsion after the rape, refuses, causing an ugly, protracted, and vicious war between David's sons.

Many of the later wives of kings become key players in the power struggles of the royal courts. The biblical text does not reward these women for taking power, famously not in the cases of Jezebel and Athaliah. These queens are known for their brutality and venality, among the worst examples of the corruptions of power in the Hebrew Bible. Jezebel, for example, contrives to have Naboth, the owner of a local vineyard, set up for treason so that the royal couple can appropriate his land. And Athaliah, upon learning of the death of her son Ahaziah, promptly kills off anyone else with a claim to the dynastic line in order that she could claim power for herself.

But this period also recalls the stories of two wise women, the wise woman of Tekoa⁴⁴ and the wise woman of Abel.⁴⁵ Much like Abigail herself, these unnamed wise women resolve conflicts and prevent excessive death. The wise woman of Tekoa uses David's judgement on a story she tells him to offer him a route to reconciling with his own son, Absalom. The wise woman of Abel negotiates with Joab, David's general, who is in pursuit of the rebel leader, Sheba. The wise woman saves the inhabitants of Abel ultimately by persuading them to execute Sheba themselves and give his head to Joab.

³³ I S 25: 2 – 42.

³⁴ I S 14: 49-50; 18: 20.

³⁵ II Sam 11.

³⁶ I K 1.

³⁷ II Sam 13.

³⁸ On Solomon's foreign wives see I K 11: 1 – 4. For the Queen of Sheba see I K 10.

³⁹ I K 14.

⁴⁰ I K 15: 2, 10, 13; also II Chr 11: 20 – 23, where she is described as Rehoboam's favourite wife.

⁴¹ I K 16: 31; 18: 13 – 19; 20:3, 5, 7; 21; II Kgs 3:2, 13; 9:22, II K 9:30–37, & 10

⁴² II K 8: 26; 11: 1ff. (also II Chr 22: 10ff.).

⁴³ B. Megillah 14b.

⁴⁴ II S 14.

⁴⁵ II S 20.

Towards the end of this period, we find the sixth of our prophetesses, Huldah [slide 16].⁴⁶ According to this lesser-known story, the high priest finds an unknown scroll in the Temple, which is passed on to King Josiah. After reading the scroll, Josiah sends a group of priests and minister to the prophetess Huldah to verify the scroll and its contents. Over the course of five verses, she speaks, not only verifying the contents of this scroll, but also prophesying the ultimate destruction of the people for worshipping false gods. However, because Josiah, in line with the contents of this scroll, has returned to the one true God, he will not live to see the destruction of the people. Aside from the repetition of this story in II Chronicles Huldah is never mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, she plays a crucial role in authorising this scroll and, in doing so, the text grants her both substantial power and authority.

Our final prophetess is Esther [Slide 17]. Set during the period of the Persian exile, Esther is the story of a young Jewish woman, who rises to the rank of Queen of Persia, enabling her to save the Jewish population of Persia from certain death at the hands of the King's vizier with a grudge. According to our midrash, Esther is a prophetess for the rather extraordinary reason, at least within the context of the Hebrew Bible, that she wrote at least some of the book. In Est 9: 32, she is described as writing the events of this story down in a scroll, rendering her literate. At time when few people were, let alone women, this attestation is more than merely noteworthy; it is boundary breaking.

Indeed, many of the women of the third part of the Hebrew Bible, known as the Writings, are boundary breakers. From the Moabite born, proscribed foreigner Ruth [slide 18], who becomes the grandmother of King David to the passionate female lover in the Song of Songs, many of these women defy the stereotypes found in other parts of the Hebrew Bible. Ruth, and her mother-in-law, Naomi, alongside the women of Jerusalem collectively speak more lines in the Book of Ruth than all of the men combined. Indeed, so fierce is Ruth's commitment to Naomi that since at least the 1990s, many lesbians have come to view Naomi and Ruth as their prototype queer ancestresses.⁴⁷ The nameless female lover of the Song of Songs is equally vocal; describing her male lover in exquisite and erotic poetry. And while much less of a significant figure in the text, Job's wife, too, speaks, telling her husband to find some integrity and curse God. Lamentations also contains a clear female voice, the personified Jerusalem, who eloquently lashes out against the disproportionate and sexually degrading punishment of God in the destruction of the city.

On the other hand, the Book of Proverbs contains some of the most essentialised and stereotyped female voices in the Hebrew Bible, in the form of the female personified figures of Wisdom and Lady Folly, pitted against each other.⁴⁸ The strange woman is also vilified, much in the way that the Ezra and Nehemiah will rail against the foreign wives of the returning exiles in their eponymous books.

But perhaps the most problematic woman of the whole of the Hebrew Bible is not a real woman at all, but an archetype found in the Book of Proverbs [Slide 19]. Described at the end of Proverbs is the most perfect woman in the world, the Woman of Valour.⁴⁹ She works herself to the bone from before dawn until well into the night. She runs a perfect household, managing all of its affairs. She bears numerous children. She gives to the poor. She makes clothes for everyone. She provides so well that her husband has no responsibilities, bar sitting at the gates of the city with the other men. And, most of all, she is happy with her place in the world. Perhaps worst of all, she is recounted as having been described as such by another woman – the mother of King Lemuel, a nameless woman herself. And traditionally in Jewish communities, this poem is recited by husbands to their wives every Friday night, perpetuating this idealised form of womanhood down the centuries.

So what can we do with all of these diverse women, and so many more that I have not yet had time to discuss? Clearly the Hebrew Bible does not present a single view of women nor is there a dearth of female Bible characters to discuss. The issues that face these women are, in fact, strikingly similar to the ones faced by countless women across history right into contemporary times. What, if any, limitations should be placed on a woman based on her gender? How can she deal with the procreative demands of heteronormative society? In what ways can women wield power and authority? How do women love and desire? How does sexual violence affect and constrain the lives of women? How do women relate to their spiritual selves?

⁴⁶ II K 22: 14 -20 (also, II Chr 34: 23 – 28).

⁴⁷ Alpert, Rebekah, "Finding our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of the Book of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer eds, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 91 - 96.

⁴⁸ E.g. Pr 9.

⁴⁹ Pr 31: 10 ff.

The Hebrew Bible addresses these many more questions. As a text that has been a cultural force for more than two millennia across large parts of the world, I am proud to help ensure literacy about these women and their stories. My grandparents' book, *Great Jewish Women*, for all of its historical limitations, opened up the world of these women for me as a young girl. I hope that this brief lecture has done the same, albeit, I trust, from a far more contemporary standpoint.

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